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(SMUGGLERS)

WASHINGTON (UPI) - A GROUP OF SMUGGLERS STUMBLED ON THE IRANIAN DESERT STAGING AREA FOR THE U.S. MILITARY FORCE THAT TRIED TO RESCUE THE HOSTAGES, BUT RAN AWAY INSTEAD OF REPORTING THE INCIDENT TO AUTHORITIES, A WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL SAID TODAY.

AT ONE POINT, A BUS WITH 53 PERSONS ON BOARD WAS STOPPED BY AMERICAN TROOPS ON THE ROAD NEAR THE STAGING ABOUT 200 MILES SOUTHEAST OF TEHRAN. THE RESCUE PARTY DETAINED THE PASSENGERS.

THEN A TRUCK AND A CAR WERE SEEN COMING DOWN THE ROADWAY. THE U.S. TROOPS "STOPPED THE TRUCK," SAID THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL.

"THE TRUCK WAS RELUCTANT TO STOP AND THEY FORCED IT TO. THE FELLOW WHO WAS DRIVING JUMPED OUT AND RAN AROUND, JUMPED INTO THE SEDAN AND THEY WENT OFF THE ROAD, HEADING ACROSS THE DESERT," HE SAID.

"I UNDERSTAND IT IS THE TRADITIONAL PATH OF SMUGGLERS IN THE AREA. THERE WAS A GENERAL INCLINATION TO BELIEVE THAT THE LAST PLACE THAT PEOPLE IN THAT CAR WERE GOING WAS TO THE LOCAL GENDARMES - AND APPARENTLY THEY DIDN'T."

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